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ABSTRACT

This position statement for administrators, teachers, providers, and caregivers for young children discusses developmentally appropriate guidance techniques for children from birth to 8 years of age. The seven principles discussed are: (1) Children are in the process of learning acceptable behavior; (2) An effective guidance approach is preventive because it respects feelings while it addresses behavior; (3) Adults need to understand the reasons for children's behavior; (4) A supportive relationship between an adult and a child is the most critical component of effective guidance; (5) Adults use forms of guidance and group management that help children learn self-control and responsiveness to the needs of others; (6) Adults model appropriate expression of their feelings; (7) Adults continue to learn even as they teach. Resources for further reading are cited. Principles are discussed in terms of applications and examples. (RH)

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Minnesota Association for the Education of Young Children

Developmentally Appropriate Guidance of Young Children

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DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE GUIDANCE OF YOUNG CHILDREN

A POSITION STATEMENT OF THE MINNESOTA ASSOCIATION FOR THE EDUCATION OF YOUNG CHILDREN.

This position statement by the Minnesota Association for the Education of Young Children (MnAEYC) addresses developmentally appropriate guidance techniques for children aged birth to eight.

The importance of guidance techniques which are based on sound child development principles has been well established. Research on self concept development and the self fulfilling prophecy demonstrates the necessity of using guidance approaches that respect the course of child development and do not label children as behavioral failures.

This document is intended for use by administrators, teachers, providers and other caregivers of young children. The term "teacher" is used in a generic sense to refer to all adults who care for young children.

SUMMARY OF PRINCIPLES

Principle one: Children are in the process of learning acceptable behavior.

Principle two: An effective guidance approach is preventive because it respects feelings even while it addresses behavior.

Principle three: Adults need to understand the reasons for children's behavior.

Principle four: A supportive relationship between an adult and a child is the most critical component of effective guidance.

Principle five: Adults use forms of guidance and group management that help children learn self control and responsiveness to the needs of others.

Principle six: Adults model appropriate expression of their feelings.

Principle seven: Adults continue to learn even as they teach.

Principle One

Children are in the process of learning acceptable behavior.

It takes individuals many years to learn appropriate ways to express strong emotions and interact appropriately with others. Young children are just beginning to learn these difficult personal and social skills. MnAEYC holds that teachers of young children should take a guidance approach that is educational in tone and responsive to the child's individual level of development rather than using a punitive discipline approach.

Application:

Think of behavior traditionally considered "bad" or "rowdy" as **mistaken.** The behavior may be unacceptable, but it is the result of the child's developmental immaturity, of not yet understanding how to act "better." In reinforcing reasonable limits, adults need to teach children "what to do instead," and not just "what not to do."

Example:

Recognize that everyone makes mistakes: "We all spill sometimes, even teachers. The sponge is in the bucket. Let me know if you need help."

Reinforce limits and teach alternatives: "People are not for hitting. When you hit people it hurts them. Use your words when you are angry. Then people will know what you're upset about."

Principle Two

An effective guidance approach is preventive because it respects feelings even while it addresses behavior.

Most adults can remember instances of discipline in their childhood that caused pain and affected self concept. The adult may have thought that s/he was dealing only with "a problem of the moment," but the effects of the punishment stayed with the individual for years. An approach to discipline that is guidance rather than punishment-oriented respects the feelings and the self concept of the child, even while it addresses mistaken behaviors.

Application:

2a. The adult structures the environment and sets expectations that enable children to succeed. Taking turns, sharing, losing at games, waiting for long periods and sustained attention to teacher-led activities are difficult skills for young children. Teachers need to use developmentally appropriate content and methods to reduce significant amounts of developmentally mistaken behavior.

Example:

Teachers de-emphasize winning and losing in games.

Teachers use open-ended art, rather than product-centered crafts.

Teachers strike a balance between teacher-led activities and individual choice in learning centers.

Application:

2b. The adult avoids discipline methods that publicly embarrass an individual such as writing a child's name on the blackboard or scolding a child in front of others. Instead, the adult devises strategies that show respect for the child's feelings while maintaining order.

Example:

Teacher to group: "As soon as we are all ready, the story can begin."

Teacher to aide (quietly): "Maybe you can sit by Sally and help her focus on the story."

Teacher to child: Teacher silently moves close to child who needs a reminder and signals him and then continues activity.

Application:

2c. The adult accepts the child's feelings, addresses the child's behavior, and avoids references to the child's personality. The adult avoids labeling a child as a "trouble-maker" or "problem child."

Example:

"Mary, it's all right to be upset. Use your words to tell Jake how you feel."

"Larry, I know you're angry, but I can't let you throw blocks."

"I understand that both of you feel the pencil is yours. Here's a second one to use for now."

2d. The adult recognizes that measures such as physically restraining a child or removing a child from the group are taken only when preventive and problem solving methods have not worked or when a child has lost control. Because these measures of last resort can be punishing for the adult as well as the child, the adult needs to help the child reconcile with the adult, feel welcome in rejoining the group and learn more effective ways of expressing strong emotions and interacting with others.

Example:

"You need to use words instead of biting. I want you to spend some time alone reading until you've calmed down. Then I'll help you figure out how to divide the blocks fairly"

"Nancy, we're glad you're ready to come to the art table now. We need some help with these paper chains."

Physical punishment is never appropriate. Repeated use of timeouts, physical restraint or other crisis interventions with an individual indicate trouble in the child's life and a need to better understand the child. Repeated use of these measures with a group indicates an over-reliance on them and a need to develop new guidance techniques.

Principle Three

Adults need to understand the reasons for children's behavior.

There are always reasons for children's behavior. Working to understand these reasons can assist the adult in helping the child. Although we can never know another person fully, we can increase our understanding and that effort in itself can lead to better relations and more mature behavior.

Application:

3a. Children do things to see what will happen. Children learn from such actions, and from others' reactions. Sometimes "experimental mistaken behavior," if harmless, should be ignored. If the adult decides to intervene, s/he should do so in a way that teaches the child about consequences and alternatives, but also appreciates the child's natural curiousity: the child's need to learn.

Example:

A child marks on a table. "Mary, you can color on paper. Let's get some soapy water and wash the table nice and clean. Then we'll get some paper to use with those markers."

Application:

3b. Children do things because they have been influenced by others to do them, either at home or in the classroom. With "socially influenced" mistaken behavior, the adult firmly but matter-of-factly reinforces a limit, but also teaches an acceptable alternative for next time.

Example:

Child says, "that damned kid makes me so mad." Teacher (hiding smile) responds: "Peter made you feel mad, and you can tell him or me, but you don't need to call names. We'll get the message."

Application:

3c. Children who show serious mistaken behavior almost always have trouble in their lives that is beyond their ability to understand and manage. Sometimes the trouble can be physical, such as a hearing loss. Other times, the trouble may be caused by a serious situation at home, center, or school. When a child shows rigid or exaggerated behavior, the adult should be alerted to the need for more information, especially if the behavior continues for more than a day or two. Observing and talking with the child can often add to an adult's understanding. Meeting with other staff can be helpful. A phone call or conference with parents may well be essential to better understanding the problem. Occasionally, consulting with an outside professional can help. When staff fully use their resources for understanding what is going on, an effective, coordinated plan for assisting the child is much easier to construct.

Example:

A teacher notices that a child shows uncharacteristic irritability especially toward the beginning and end of each week. Talks with a parent determine that the parents have separated and the child is living with the mother during the week and the father on the weekends. The staff works together with the parents to make the transitions more understandable and less traumatic for the child.

Principle Four

A supportive relationship between an adult and a child is the most critical component of effective guidance.

Trust and acceptance are the prerequisite foundation of the relationship between an adult and a child. Not only do children learn about behavior from an adult, they also learn about themselves. It is generally understood that children who are labelled "behavior problems," tend to see themselves as the adult does and to show more mistaken behavior than before they were labelled. On the other hand, children who gain the understanding that they are valued and belong tend to develop positive self concepts and have less need to act out against the world.

Application:

An irony of teaching is that the children who act the "worst" need a helping relationship the most, and are often the hardest to accept. Building relationships with such children is a challenge for the early childhood teacher and yet it is a critical task. In constructing productive relations with children who show troubling behavior, teachers need not "love" them, but do need to find ways to accept them as individuals and as members of the group.

Example:

The teacher talks with the child, the child's parents, other staff and outside professionals to gain a better understanding of the child.

The teacher lists qualities of the child that she likes, appreciates, respects and can affirm. The teacher finds times during the day to focus positive attention on the child.

The teacher helps the child into activities where s/he can succeed.

REMINDER: An adult cannot build a supportive relationship primarily on acts of discipline.

Principle Five

Adults use forms of guidance and group management that help children learn self control and responsiveness to the needs of others.

Children need to be able to decide between "right and wrong" not on the basis of fear of authority or peer pressure but rather on the basis of careful thought. The more we can help children to make thoughtful decisions in social situations when they are young, the more we are assisting them to become caring, responsible adults.

Application:

Children need many appropriate opportunities to solve problems, make decisions and learn from their experiences.

Example:

Teacher to two arguing children: "You two seem to be having a problem. I want you each to tell me what happened and then we'll work out a solution together."

Teacher to child: "Karen, you choose. Let everyone have a turn or find an empty table and work by yourself."

Principle Six

Adults model appropriate expression of their feelings.

As professionals, teachers of young children make decisions about how to respond to behavior based on their judgements of the events at the time. Because we are human, sometimes we may jump in too quickly, over-react, show inconsistency with limits, lose our tempers, or otherwise disclose our particular human frailties. Teachers who are professionals attempt to learn from their mistakes. Teachers who work with children know that the one set of skills that is more difficult to learn than how to express feelings in acceptable ways is how to <u>teach</u> these skills to children. They have accepted the fact that being a caring teacher is a life-long task.

Application:

When upset, teachers use methods to diffuse and express their feelings which do not put down the other person. They may pay attention to a "victim" first and wait to talk with the child who did the hurting until after they've cooled down. They may use "I messages" to describe their feeling rather than accuse and disparage the "culprits." They may firmly request more information before they make a hasty judgement. They may check themselves before responding to a child who is difficult for them to understand. Finally, they monitor their moods and feelings and are aware of their impact on teaching effectiveness.

Example:

"I am really bothered that the water got spilled out of the aquarium, and we need to take time right now to talk about this."

"I'm really upset about this mess. I'm angry now but I'll talk to you about it later when I calm down."

"When I see puzzle pieces spilled on the floor I feel upset because I'm worried that we'll lose them and then we won't be able to do the puzzle anymore."

Principle Seven

Teachers continue to learn even as they teach.

Application:

Teachers recognize that they are learners even as they are teachers.

Examples:

Teachers and care givers should observe, and be observed by, other professionals in order to get feedback for personal review of teaching practices.

Teachers use collaborations with parents, staff, and outside professionals in order to continue learning about the children they work with.

Teachers read, attend courses, conferences, and workshops in order to update their store of ideas.

Teachers use observation and communication skills to learn from the best of all teachers, the children themselves.

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